Algonquin wolf researchers studying North Hastings

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By Nate Smelle

Most residents of North Hastings are accustomed to the frequent sights and sounds of wildlife residing in the area's forests, fields and wetlands. However, catching a rare glimpse of the elusive Algonquin wolf or hearing the howling of a pack echoing through the forest is an experience that makes even the most seasoned naturalist drop their jaw in wonder. Over the next month, Earthroots Wolves Ontario campaigner and director of wildlife conservation campaigns, Hannah Barron, is hoping to have as many close encounters like these as possible. As part of a province-wide sweep to determine the extent of the Algonquin wolves' range in unprotected areas, Barron, along with her assistant Adrienne Chalaturnyk, will be searching for evidence that proves the Algonquin wolves' range includes the Bancroft area. Barron began her career researching the Algonquin wolf in 2013 while managing a team based out of Trent University conducting the Eastern Wolf Survey. At the time, she said there was very little known about where the species lived outside the boundaries of Algonquin Park. Since then she said, populations have been discovered in Killarney Provincial Park, Kawartha Highlands Signature Site, and Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands. With less than five per cent of the species' known territory in the province under protection, Barron's research is an important and necessary next step towards expanding protection of the Algonquin wolf. ?This is really just the very beginning of the research outside of where they have been looking at them for the past 50+ years,? said Barron. ?So, now we are branching out with a very non-invasive approach to find as much DNA as we can find from these animals.? By collecting scat, urine, blood and hair samples in the Bancroft area, Barron explained that they will be able acquire a better understanding of the southern limits of the Algonquin wolves' range. If they discover an abundance

of samples in the area, she said it could warrant additional research in the future that would increase the likelihood for improved protection of the threatened species. When Algonquin wolves were listed as a threatened species in June 2016, Barron said they automatically became protected throughout the province under the Endangered Species Act. Despite the Algonquin wolf's status, she said the protection it received ?was useless? because killing coyotes ? a species that looks very similar to the Algonquin wolf ? was still legally occurring throughout the two species' overlapping territories. Barron said that because the individuals killing these animals were not required to submit DNA samples to identify what they are killing, they have no way of knowing how many Algonquin wolves have been killed.To address the inadequacy of the Algonquin wolves' protection, she said the provincial government decided to eliminate its protection throughout most of the province. ?Rather than protect both wolves and coyotes throughout the suspected wolf's range, or even require DNA to be given on all legally harvested coyotes, they just reduced protection to places where the wolves had been found,? said Barron. ?Nevertheless, hunting and trapping were identified as the primary threats to the recovery of the species, and research (most of which was funded by the Ontario government) has concluded that without additional protection, recovery was unlikely. It seems like current protection is too much like disconnected islands to give the wolves a chance to survive, find mates of their own kind ? instead of coyotes, which are much more numerous ? to reproduce with, and establish beyond those areas.? According to Barron, two thirds of the Algonquin wolves' protected areas remain open to hunting. Acknowledging the vital ecological role of wolves within an ecosystem as an apex predator, she said the Algonquin wolf is integral to the health and preservation of biodiversity. When they are removed from the top of the food chain, Barron said it can have a devastating effect on other scavenger species such as ravens, eagles, and bears. Furthermore, without an apex predator like the Algonquin wolf to help sustain the balanced of an ecosystem, she said species such as white-tailed deer can cause even more damage by overgrazing the landscape. While many who oppose a hunting and trapping ban as part of the Algonquin wolf recovery strategy expect there to be an explosion of wolves and coyotes in the area, Barron said this is not the case. With such a ban in place in Algonquin Park, she said research has shown that in fact, the numbers of canids in the area tend to decrease. ?Algonquin wolf recovery and the hunting/trapping ban doesn't mean that there will just be more and more wolves and coyotes,? said Barron. ?These animals are both territorial and exclude one another, but if the wolves have the upper hand ? in habitat that suits them better, say, with larger prey ? then they will eventually push out coyotes. In the end, a recovered wolf habitat will probably have fewer large canids. This is because coyotes can live at higher densities than wolves since they are generalists and can survive off small animals rather than needing big prey to eat.? Understanding the magnitude of the task at hand in exploring North Hastings, Barron said she is looking to build her team locally by recruiting citizen scientists. She encourages anyone interested in participating in the study to contact her directly. Barron said that participants will be given a DNA sample collecting kit along with instructions on how to collect samples properly. For more information on Earthroots Wolves Ontario campaign, or to volunteer as a citizen scientist please contact Hannah Barron, at hannah@earthroots.org.